













# The maximum of meaning

By Victor Erlich

**VYRY LOTMAN:**  
Analysis of the Poetic Text  
Edited and translated by D. Barton  
Johnson  
309pp. Ann Arbor, Michigan:  
Ardis. \$16.95.

For some fifteen years now a group of Soviet scholars based respectively in Moscow and Tartu (Estonia) have been engaged in a concerted effort to tackle problems of language, literature and culture along Structuralist-semiotic lines. The Moscow contingent, clustered around the Institute of Slavonic and Russian Studies of the Academy of Sciences, includes Vyacheslav Ivanov, who has written with equal authority about structural typology of languages and S. S. Slonimskii, whose *Poetics of Composition* recently translated into English, focuses rewardingly on the point-of-view in literature and on perspective in painting. Yet his common consent Soviet neo-structuralism owes much of its vitality and cohesion to the scholarly, pedagogical and editorial activities of Yuri Lotman, professor of Russian Studies in the University of Tartu. Since 1964 the chief outlet for more significant recent work in Soviet semiotics.

Lotman began his academic career as a traditional literary historian. His studies of Pushkin and such early nineteenth-century figures as N. Karamzin and P. Yazykov tended towards biography and intellectual history rather than poetics. Since the early 1960s he has felt strongly drawn to problems of literary theory and increasingly determined to construct a study of literature as a coherent discipline, a "science." The "unfolding of literature" which he has come to propose is closely allied to structural theory and information theory and is indissolubly linked to semiotics. In a useful recent assessment of Lotman's theory of literature, published in a new journal of poetics, *PTL*, Ann Shukman observes:

Culture and the understanding of it worked out by the Moscow-Tartu semiotic circle is a vast communication network functioning in the given society. Literature is one of the many channels for the communication of information and information theory with its predictive, summative criteria of predictability and entropy is applicable to the study. Lotman's particular contribution has been to conceptualize literature as a socially functioning and historically continuing semiotic phenomenon which creates and preserves this "information."

Art is defined here as a secondary modeling system, the artistic text as a "special kind of organized semiotic structure."

Confirmation of this view of literature and of literary studies has become Lotman's major project. His *Lectures on Structural Poetics* (1969), a cogent and somewhat rigid treatise followed by a more flexible *Text (1970)*, *Analysis of the Poetic Text*, originally published in 1972 and now made available to the English-speaking reader in a superb translation by D. Barton Johnson, clearly was the most systematic of Lotman's works.

Prof. Lotman succinctly and, on the whole, lucidly presents the most important concepts of poetics as a material of literary theory. The nature of poetry, its structure and its function are treated in a way that is both systematic and comprehensive. The analysis of the poetic text is presented in a way that is both systematic and comprehensive. The analysis of the poetic text is presented in a way that is both systematic and comprehensive.

everyday-life and biographical contexts—to echo the aesthetic semiotics of the first Formalist manifesto. By the same token, he too keenly attuned to the complex interplay between sound and sense in poetry to indulge in the Futurist-inspired celebration of "pure euphony" that marked Shklovsky's *The Knight's Path* (1923) and Jakobson's *Recent Russian Poetry* (1921).

Yor Russian Formalism was not a static phenomenon. If Lotman's cry from its early excesses, he bears considerable resemblance to such mature late-Formalist state-ments as the Jakobson-Tynyanov interrelationship of literature and other cultural phenomena in terms of their structuralist-semiotic analysis. Lotman's affinity for Roman Jakobson's brand of structural poetics, including his recent studies in "grammar of poetry and poetry of grammar," is undeniably.

Similarly, his concept of the inner dynamics of the poetic text is closely akin to Tynyanov's insights into the semantic density of verse. "Semantization" of signs in ordinary language is non-significant in contrast to the analysis of the poetic text as the salient characteristic of poetic discourse. In an earlier work Lotman argued that "all elements in poetry are semiotic elements." In the present book he describes meaning as a complexly constructed element appearing in the language may in poetry acquire a semantic character, thereby acquiring a supplementary meaning. Elsewhere the point is couched to a more technical terminology: "The striving for maximal informational saturation underlies the structure of the artistic text."

Another aspect of the Tynyanov legacy which looms large here is the functional or contextual approach to literary evolution. This is the handling of the distinction between poetry and prose. He properly spurns the naive notion that prose is more basic or "primary" than poetry. Actually, he argues, it is the reverse that is more nearly true: "Poetic speech was originally the only possible medium of verbal art." At its emergence, poetic prose is perceived as a departure from the background of poetic culture, and seen as a departure from the poetic.

Lotman's case in point is the reception of Pushkin's prose, which grew out of "decades of maturing poetic culture" and flourished in the wake of Pushkin's own brilliant poetic achievement. Clearly, the connection most to Lotman in the logical priority of poetry vis-à-vis prose, which a literary theorist would do well not to overgeneralize, would be the argument. Foremost among them is the recognition that the absence of a device which the verbal art can be no less operative more broadly, that our aesthetic body of writing is inseparable from the set of expectations which we bring to it, from the system or system that dominates our literary culture.

As one might expect, the poetic text is central to Lotman's theory. In this view a literary text is interpreted and perceived against the background of other texts and with reference to other texts. The semiotic analysis of literary texts is only ship of text and system of text. Lotman's analysis of the poetic text is presented in a way that is both systematic and comprehensive. The analysis of the poetic text is presented in a way that is both systematic and comprehensive.

mon denominator is recognition or recurrence of comparative phenomena. The Lotman definitions set more store by the differences between the recurring elements than the similarities or identities of their positions. Rhythmicity in poetry is the cyclical repetition of different elements in identical positions toward the aim of equating the equal or revealing similarity in difference, or the repetition of the identical with the aim of revealing the character of this identity. By the same token, the cyclical repetition of the identical with the aim of revealing the character of this identity. By the same token, the cyclical repetition of the identical with the aim of revealing the character of this identity.

A student of poetics, less committed to a "dialectical" view of the problem, may find this a quibbling with the observation that where the rhyme is a mere corollary of such extra-aesthetic factors as grammatical symmetry or lexical identity it is scarcely recognizable as such. But to insist in a textbook of poetics on the "commensurability" of a signa qua non of an effective rhyme betrays a more basic, a tendency to give preferential treatment to poetry built upon the Pushkinian principle of the "unification of disparate ideas."

The above sketchy and selective summary fails to do justice to the range and cogency of Lotman's argument. His grip on Structuralist methodology is firm, his awareness of the insights and opportunities of twentieth-century poetics keen and well articulated. Above all, he combines a fine sense of the interrela-

tionship between sound and meaning in a poem with a sophisticated grasp of its larger socio-cultural setting. And yet I find some of his formulations less than helpful and some of his emphases debatable.

First, I must own up to a degree of uneasiness about Lotman's reliance on cybernetic terminology, most notably over inclination to locate the difference of poetry in the "striving for maximal informational saturation." To remember that Verlaque's "Chanson d'automne" can scarcely be sold to carry more information than does a weather report would be to register a totally misguided "response. Obviously, the word "information" is used here in a special, technical sense. What is suggested is not a body of data organization and degree of verbal surmise, multiplicity of meanings operative in a text. I see no reason to object to these implications of the Lotmanian formula but I am not sure that much is gained by translating insights of modern poetics into the language of information theory. "Speech organization" is its entire phonic texture" or better still, actualization of the word in all its aspects, context or ambiguity" (in the sense as we have been endemic in literary theory, East and West, since the 1920s). I have yet to be persuaded that the use of such maximal informational saturation marks a significant advance in the modern endeavour to pin down the distinctive nature of poetry.

The other difficulty which I have with Lotman's literary theorizing has to do with his tendency to overinvest in his key concepts and to press their claims a bit harder than the present state of the art or its available evidence seems to warrant. As I have already noted, he is prone to overgeneralize, to build in a definition, a pattern latest in all of poetry but especially characteristic of poetic language, the same token, his insistence on the phonological level of poetic structure may cause him to short-circuit the intricate connections between sound and meaning. For it is one thing to recognize that no significant dimension of poetic language could be deemed irrelevant to the overall effect of meaning of the poem, in other words, to be judged immune to semantization. It is quite another to insist that "any element on the poetic level can be elevated to rank of meaningful elements" (italics added).

These mild apprehensions are not entirely dispelled by the twelve textual analyses which make up Part II. The texts themselves are not necessarily masterpieces or "touchstones," though, as Lotman, masters. (A few of the texts, notably Blok's "To Anna Akhmatova" or Mayakovsky's "The Scheme of a Laughing Poem" selected for analysis, are slight efforts by major poets). Each poem was selected frankly, and, under the circumstances, not inappropriately, to illustrate a general poetic mechanism. Thus Blok's "To Anna Akhmatova" is chosen for the demonstration of the "phonological-metrical level of a text."

I must confess that, on the whole, I found Lotman's "practical criticism" somewhat disappointing. This is not to say that there is little to applaud or admire here. An erudite and wide-ranging literary knowledge, Lotman's piece is easy to read for those who know no Russian, but it does not seem to me as illuminating as some of his analyses of short poems in his earlier work. In fact, one could say that the analyses of these poems are more of a "show" than a "tell," providing any new insights into the reader's knowledge of the poems.

With frequent references to such predecessors as Shklovsky, Elkhennanov and Tynyanov, and equally to Lotman's own theoretical work on the two volumes all start from the same point. The first volume, *Generating the Literary Text*, 77pp., Volume 2: *Poetry and Prose*, 84pp., Oxford: Holdon Books, £2.50 per volume.

In Stalin's Russia formalism became a dirty word, but the formal method of studying literature survived and is now once again officially accepted in the Soviet Union. Lotman's case in point is the reception of Pushkin's prose, which grew out of "decades of maturing poetic culture" and flourished in the wake of Pushkin's own brilliant poetic achievement. Clearly, the connection most to Lotman in the logical priority of poetry vis-à-vis prose, which a literary theorist would do well not to overgeneralize, would be the argument. Foremost among them is the recognition that the absence of a device which the verbal art can be no less operative more broadly, that our aesthetic body of writing is inseparable from the set of expectations which we bring to it, from the system or system that dominates our literary culture.

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City of elevators without a thirteenth floor,  
I fly down a flight of frozen stairs but where  
When my comparisons collapse, am I go?  
I've been five minutes late since the day I was born  
And swallowed the urge to scream but sweetly  
And at whom? Who deserves this vital breath of anger  
The tender, this blindfolded choice between  
Two clenched fists of a carnival barker  
Containing nothing and a subway token, respectively?

All love's secrets are dirty, hooray! I but  
Guess what's stretching my eyelids? Oh blessed irrelevance  
Of titles without a vase! The difference  
Between one and elm is growing  
And the heart, less blue than helicopter, escapes  
The empty cage, with its door swung open to the sky.

press their claims a bit harder than the present state of the art or its available evidence seems to warrant. As I have already noted, he is prone to overgeneralize, to build in a definition, a pattern latest in all of poetry but especially characteristic of poetic language, the same token, his insistence on the phonological level of poetic structure may cause him to short-circuit the intricate connections between sound and meaning. For it is one thing to recognize that no significant dimension of poetic language could be deemed irrelevant to the overall effect of meaning of the poem, in other words, to be judged immune to semantization. It is quite another to insist that "any element on the poetic level can be elevated to rank of meaningful elements" (italics added).

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David Lehman

## Subterranean schemes

By Lubomir Dolzél

**ALAN DUNDES:**  
Analytic Essays in Folklore  
265pp. The Hague: Mouton. Paper-  
back, £14.95.

**OJO AREWA AND G. M. SHREVE:**  
The Genesis of Structures in African  
Narrative  
Volume 1: Zande Trickster Tales  
280pp. New York: Conch Magazine.  
\$20.

Alan Dundes has expanded substantially the range of American folklore studies and enriched the methodology. The essays in this collection were originally published between 1961 and 1971, that is on either side of his influential monograph, *The Folklore of the North American Indian* (1964). This monograph, which is directly by the work of Vladimir Propp, established Professor Dundes as the main representative of structuralism in American folklore studies. However, the collection in *Analytic Essays in Folklore* makes it quite clear that simultaneously with developing his structural approach, Professor Dundes was also interested in applying psychoanalytic concepts to the study of folklore.

At first sight, these two approaches make rather strange bedfellows. Professor Dundes himself has emphasized the structural approach emerged as a reaction to the traditional historical approach. Instead of studying isolated phenomena in their evolution, it focused on the relationships between the parts and the whole; instead of concentrating on genealogical explanations, it emphasized the functional aspect. As a psychoanalyst, Professor Dundes seems to be fascinated with those very questions which the structural approach had pushed into the background: the interpretation of isolated motifs (the earth-diver, the summoning of the deity through fasting, father-son conflict, the "hook-form" and so on), and the problem of genesis, which returns in the form of speculation about "psychological origin."

On closer inspection, certain fundamental features turn out to be common to both Professor Dundes' structuralism and his psychoanalytic approach. To start with, he holds that the meaning of a text is always hidden beneath the "surface" in on "underlying" ("deep") structure. In fact, the "surface" meaning is to be either irrelevant, or misleading, or folktale text is a sort of riddle which can be solved only by suggesting an interpretation in terms of an underlying scheme. From this general point of view, it makes no difference whether the folkloric scheme is borrowed from the language of structuralism or that of psychoanalysis.

A necessary consequence of Professor Dundes' procedure is the uniformity of his interpretations. The structural (Proppian) scheme assigned not only to folktales, but also to legends, and the specific structural features of a genre are necessarily left out. The psychoanalytic (Oedipal) scheme is assigned to the plot of Jack and the Beanstalk, the Grail legend, and the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. This last case is especially instructive: the interpretation not only denies the "surface" meaning of the story ("a child should always tell the truth"), but also skips easily over the double meaning of cherry ("tree" and "fruit").

This uniformity of interpretation resembles, in fact, the results of the old "projection" method, which Professor Dundes criticizes. To be sure, in the new psychoanalytic approach, the "projection" or the "vegetative rebirth" story, or rather the Proppian plot or "family romance," which is told again and again, in either case, the cultural and historical variety of folkloric narratives is reduced to a static form, which is always there because the interpreter has decided to find it there.

Nowhere in this collection does Professor Dundes discuss the relationship between the structural and psychoanalytic approaches, they are simply applied to two different sets of phenomena. Such a theoretical split is even more obvious in *The Genesis of Structures in African Narrative* by O. Arewa and G. M. Shreve. In the first four chapters, we are offered a psychoanalytic approach to folklore; the fourth

chapter, which is opposed to provide a "covering theory" is a bland re-statement of the old "projection" method. The relationship between these two systems is not at all obvious, but the authors do not bother to tell us what it is.

The theoretical laxity of this book is only one manifestation of a more general problem: poor editing. There are many instances of stylistic sloppiness and odd terminology. The relatively natural world of the context of the story ("viewing and acting in the world"), symbols and operations are introduced which are never properly explained. Many pages are filled with a redundant reproduction of Propp's list of functions of Zande trickster tales. In the introduction, a "specific analysis of one tale from the collection" is promised for the second half of Section III; one looks in vain for such an analysis; instead a schematic "derivational diagram" (completely unexplained) of tale No 7 is inserted at the end of Section IV.

Unlike Professor Dundes, the authors of this book postulate a connection between the universal "deep" structure and culturally determined "surface" structures; the level of "deep" structure, a schematic uniformity appears again. It is as if folklorists can accept the idea of a universal "deep" structure only in the form of a pre-fabricated scheme which is repeated, applied to new texts and materials in the case of the trickster tales, the Proppian scheme is doubly inappropriate in that these seem to be structurally heterogeneous. As the recent work of Denise Paulme and Claude Bremond has demonstrated, there are many forms and "functions" of trickster tales, which are always there because the interpreter has decided to find it there.

What the weaknesses of the applied section of *Analytic Essays* reflect on the principles which Lotman expounds so confidently in Part I, risks of using individual poems in order to illustrate general propositions. The latter procedure is as precarious as it is legitimate. Interpretation of poetry cannot dispense with a model, with sharply defined concepts and categories. Furthermore, criticism qua discursive mode can never do justice, try as it may, to the uniqueness, the unrepeatable of the individual poem. To analyze, to explicate, to interpret, means always in some degree to label, to justify a context, to relate to draw parallels with comparable entities or invoke larger ones: be they the poet's oeuvre, an appropriate thematic cluster of metrical patterns, a literary style or genre, or the poem within a context that is apt to illuminate it. All I am suggesting is that the critic's choice of the relevant context he dictated less by his overall methodological competence than by the distinctive tenor and texture of the work under discussion.

Whatever the pitfalls and the limitations of the Lotmanian enterprise, it represents a most sophisticated and intellectually coherent development in present-day Soviet literary scholarship as well as one of the most rigorous manifestations of the current Structuralist approach to literary studies. Moreover, it has substance and integrity. Lotman's prose can be overly abstruse and cumbersome, but it is never wilfully opaque or self-consciously pretentious. And this, at our present juncture, is something to be grateful for.

It is only fair to add that these exercises in the structural analysis of literature do not take the full measure of Lotman's interpretive skills. In his provocative treatment of stylistic space in Gogol (1968), and in his more recent discussion of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin (1975), he proved not only a resourceful theorist but also an acute and perceptive textual critic.

For further details please write to Rosemary Hamilton (TL5), The Macmillan Press, Little Essex Street, London WC2R 3LP.

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1990

But they, at not infrequent moments, are as open as orderly, as tipsy, and as powerful as Dryden himself. He not inferior even to Bon Jonson, who produced a few poems and passages (fewer even than Shelley's) as perfect as anything in the language. Think of "The fresh fount," "Drink to me only," "It is not growing like a tree!" Yet the bulk of Ben Jonson's verse is

more lapsed even than Dryden's  
—whom possibly Pope may also  
exalt, as the thirteenth century be-  
lieved. Certainly the middle and in-  
genious he does. Yet he is not in-  
less complete, less human, probably  
generally better than the other. He  
go to Chaucer, and those who derive  
from him, and those who derive  
the rhymed couplets, the poet of the  
gainsay, as from hell, the poet of the  
last that imprisoned Italy; and those  
last, as he has been truly pointed  
out, Shakespeare far surpassed the  
fable, like that of such a poet. Trifling  
promising to succeed in a cake, while  
the pelste. You might as well dis-  
pore the flight of the great well com-  
to that of swallow or eagle, as to  
Dryden's imagination to Shelley's or  
Wilkins's. Yet for traversing plains  
matchless—undiminished vigour he  
in the air like never soars, or dances  
holds a straight course; but he  
level, and stands as a column on the  
ground where he alights as on the  
started, and with head erect, he  
still to find his whereabouts have  
still that familiar unlearned own-

## Jan 1

# Heril

of the best land and always

still smartly painted up and could dump trouble-makers over the blind one of an English boy's border and earn the approval

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